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FREE COMPOSITION IN FIRST SEMESTER

By E. M. LEBERT

WHEN students take up a new subject, they are generally quite enthusiastic about it; they love new things. But after a few weeks they often change their mind, they work only for credits, and are utterly devoid of real ambition: their interest has died out. This, if I am not mistaken, is specially true of French. After a few days of vivid interest, many consider the study of French a kind of dull exercise in which one replaces English words by French words, or vice versa, according to a more or less capricious set of rules. Any originality or individuality seems to be barred and, as a result, students devote their time to more interesting activities. Is it possible to keep up the enthusiasm of the first days and if so how can we do it?

It has been the good luck of the present writer to have a class which grew more and more interested and almost from the beginning found French a medium for the expression of their own ideas and feelings. They enjoyed in it an opportunity to use not only their reason, their power of observation, and their memory, but also their elementary creative imagination.

The excellent grammar we were using, like many other excellent elementary books, had a very useful exercise called oral drill. Under this title the book had the special difficulties of the lesson (grammar and vocabulary) presented in some twenty to fifty ready made phrases between which there was no connection. My students asked me if we could not learn French without this special drill. I answered I was afraid not; but I asked, in my turn, if we could not make the dull exercise interesting by playing with it the game of completing sentences. I demonstrated how it could be done with the vocabulary we had studied.[1] The lesson was on contraction. The first phrase was: "to the professor." The first student called upon gave the easiest form: "L'élève parle au professeur." A second one volunteered: "Il donne un cahier au professeur." After a suggesting gesture we had: "Il donne la main au professeur," which brought at once: "La maîtresse

[1] I had added a number of words to the vocabulary of the first lessons, especially the parts of the body, with the necessary remarks about the use of the definite article with the latter.

d'école donne la main au professeur." This sentence was a success and was followed by: "Elle donne le bras au professeur." A boy, remembering an example I had given, exclaimed: "Attention au professeur!" Everybody laughed and I thought that this phrase could be developed into a story. Here is the story: "Emile est dans la salle de classe. Il est à la troisième table entre Paul et Henri. Il a un livre sur la table. Il a les yeux sur le livre mais il a la tête à Newburg . . . Le professeur a les yeux sur Emile. Il a une règle sous le bras. Emile, attention au professeur!" The dreaded exercise had become interesting without ceasing to be a rigid training drill for our grammar and vocabulary. The mind of the students had free play and this freedom was enjoyed equally by teacher and pupils.

We kept on with that kind of drill for weeks, without neglecting any exercise offered by our grammar; in fact we treated many of them in the same way as the oral drills. Noticing that one or two students had tried to connect two or three detached verb phrases, I encouraged that new use of the creative imagination. We called it "the dot puzzle game." And it developed new interest. An example will make clear why we enjoyed our work. In a somewhat advanced drill we had this series of unconnected sentences to translate: "He will go. . . . Where are you going? etc." We had the following variations on the theme: Il ira à Chicago par le train de neuf heures. Il y va toutes les semaines. Y alliez-vous avec lui—Vous dites que Dana n'ira pas au théâtre ce soir. Je vous dis qu'il ira. Voyez, il y va maintenant. Y alliez-vous aussi?—Paul ira certainement à l'université si Marie y va.—Qu'alliez vous dire? I might quote other individualizations of these three English verb phrases where the connecting link was "going to war," "going to a friend's home," "going to a game." Of course it took a long time to come to such variety but the results are based on the principle illustrated. Perhaps a final example may be of interest. The sentence given in the book was: "Nobody has taken it." In trying to give life to the word group a student wrote: "Quand je demande à ma mère où est ma robe, elle me répond: Personne ne l'a prise."

Thus was added to the pedagogical principle that "repetition is the key to learning" the complementary principle that the *key to learning a living language is lifelike variety in personal reaction.*

As may be readily understood, this habit of completing and connecting somebody else's thought developed self-reliance and tended to self expression which was bound to culminate in free composition.

Very early in the course some students tried to write stories, but instead of making their small vocabulary go a long way, they hunted for words in their dictionary and with their own logic, they wrote unknown forms of verbs, making sentences with a very special construction of their own. They stumbled against unforeseen difficulties at each step. They had to be reminded of the fact that they knew very little French. However they were not to be discouraged. So I tried to give them the right attitude by the following analogy: "You do not start dancing in a hall without paying attention to the walls; else you will soon be brought back to your sense of reality. . . . You do not stop dancing either because there are walls to the hall. . . . Realize what your own limitations in French are; always keep within your actual knowledge. Move freely inside the walls which surround you, but avoid any word, any form that you have not yet found in your text: it might mean bumping against a mistake." Proceeding by example day after day we made up stories with our limited vocabulary and sentences, cutting out details which could not be expressed with the words we had learned. Here is a story told after 12 to 15 lessons.

SAMEDI SOIR

Il est 7 heures. Un grand garçon sonne à la porte de Mlle Hélène. La bonne ouvre la porte.—Mademoiselle Hélène est-elle à la maison?—Oui, Monsieur. Voulez-vous entrer dans le salon, s'il vous plaît.—Une heure après, Mademoiselle Hélène entre dans le salon. Elle a son chapeau sur la tête. "Bonsoir, Monsieur Paul.—Bonsoir, Mademoiselle. Voulez-vous aller au cinéma?—Avec plaisir."

Ils sont à la porte du cinéma. Paul cherche dans sa poche. Il donne 50 sous: "Deux billets, s'il vous plaît . . ." Ils entrent . . . Paul donne les billets.

Après le cinéma ils entrent au "Candyland." Mlle Hélène aime les bonbons. Paul cherche dans sa poche: il donne un dollar. . . . Il est onze heures moins cinq. Ils sont devant la porte

de Mlle Hélène, mais ils ne sonnent pas. Hélène ne veut pas entrer avant onze heures. Onze heures sonnent. Hélène donne la main à Paul. "Bonsoir, Paul, merci." La bonne ouvre la porte. "Au revoir, Monsieur Paul." Mlle Hélène entre dans la maison. Paul n'entre pas. . . . Il regarde la porte.

At times to avoid a form omitted by our text book we had to seek a slight circumlocution for our thought. Fearing the special difficulty of the form "ils veulent," our grammar had not given it in its first conjugation of *vouloir*. Students wanted to say "Mr. and Mrs. —— of New York want to go to Washington," and of course wrote "voulent". I showed them how they could complete their drill on *vouloir* by going to the table of irregular verbs, but I asked them if we could not express the thought without using that form. The result was: "Monsieur X de New York veut aller à Washington avec Mme X. . . ." In fact we always tried to find more than one form for the same idea, for instance, we said, "Le chapeau de Mlle Barbara est sur sa tête. Mlle B. a son chapeau sur la tête."

Finally, four weeks after our first French lesson a student wrote the following original composition, reproduced here directly from the student's copy-book with all its mistakes.

Jean est l'ami de Pierre. Pierre est vieux et est professeur à G. C. Jean est élève là. Jean est le fils d'un vieux ami de Pierre. Jean est à la table dans la maison de Pierre. Pierre dit: Où allez-vous après le collège? En Juillet je vais à Philadelphia. A Philadelphia? J'ai un ami à Philadelphia. Il est Monsieur Schmidt. Je vais écrire à Monsieur Schmidt et dire: "Jean est mon ami: il va à Philadelphia en Juillet. Il est un très bon garçon et est le fils de mon vieux ami Jones."

En Juillet Jean va à Philadelphia. Là il recontre Mr. Schmidt. Schmidt saisit Jean et dit: "Ici est Jean le ami de mon vieux ami Pierre. Va-t-il bien avec Pierre? Voulez-vous aller avec moi à la maison? Sommes amis. Vos amis sont mes amis.

The composition was read in class from the student's paper. The author was looked upon with wondering eyes when I gave his name. After due praise for the successful handling of the vocabulary, we passed to a less agreeable exercise: mistakes were corrected by the class from the grammatical point of view. In order to give a clear example of the method we followed, when we had evolved it, I shall suppose here that we treated this story as we

treated many others later. Other expressions for the same thought were to be found. At first a single word was replaced by another: "Jean est à la table," became "Jean dîne." To avoid a difficult form like "soyons," which to be sure we found in our grammar, we substituted this well known expression, "Nous allons être amis." Finally we recast a few sentences for practice. "Un élève de G. C., Jean, est dans la maison d'un professeur. Le professeur aime beaucoup Jean parce qu'il est le fils de son vieux ami Jones. Jean dîne avec le professeur. . . ." The form *vieil* was not in our book and so we kept the form *vieux* to avoid confusion in the mind of the students at so early a stage. Quite often some members of the class started to smile: the composition which was so good was all made over again: but soon they understood that we were not merely trying to better the composition, but were learning how to vary the expression of a thought. In my book I noted down an attempt to develop the last part of the above story: a person comes with a letter of introduction to a friend of his aunt. The purpose of all these exercises was to have the students collaborate in the making of a story and invite them to write stories by themselves: it looked so simple.

In fact a little more initiative was shown after this first composition. The expressions were more varied and in about a week a second student had a story. The first successful boy kept on writing with more and more confidence. A month later eleven out of twelve students were making original compositions. So, for our second monthly quiz (November 19), I ventured to offer the following suggestion: "You will write at your leisure original compositions using your own words only: go over your story two or three times at least, consulting your written list of ordinary mistakes. Then memorize your story. You will be allowed to write it from memory as a part of your examination. Of course no written paper must be used in the class room: use your brains only." All of us were astounded at the results. We had twelve original compositions in clear if not perfect French. For the examination the students had worked on their composition more intensely than they would have done in ordinary circumstances, and in preparing and polishing their story they had reviewed thoroughly their French for a direct application. The subjects treated were mostly anecdotes of travel or children's stories. Whoever knows young Americans must expect these stories to be

"funny." They are most of the time, but occasionally one finds something deeper.

The following example was written on December 8, three weeks later. The story given here has been corrected in the way described above in collaboration with the writer. A few mistakes have disappeared and a few sentences that were too complex were simplified, but we did not add or change a single thought.

NOËL

Il y a 1920 ans, en Décembre, une jeune femme et son mari étaient dans une petite ville qu'on appelle Bethléem. Ils avaient demandé une chambre pour passer la nuit. Mais il n'y avait pas de chambre pour eux dans l'hôtel. Ils étaient donc allés au bâtiment pour les chevaux.

Cette nuit-là, il y avait dans les champs des hommes sages et du ciel ils ont entendu ceci: "N'ayez pas peur, mais allez à la ville qu'on appelle Bethléem. Là vous trouverez un petit enfant." Donc ces hommes sages sont allés à B. . . et ils ont trouvé le petit garçon et quand ils l'ont vu, ils l'ont aimé. Ils ont apporté beaucoup de choses pour le petit Jésus, et pour sa mère Marie.

Puis ils sont sortis du bâtiment et ils ont dit à tout le monde ce qu'ils avaient vu.

Maintenant le monde est meilleur et plus aimable, parce que cet enfant a été bon et aimable, le meilleur et le plus aimable des enfants des hommes.

Dimanche, dans notre église nous donnerons une petite fête pour les enfants pauvres, parce que nous aimons ce petit enfant que les hommes sages ont trouvé dans la ville de Bethléem. Voulez-vous venir et donner quelque chose aussi?

A religious soul expressed its feelings in this simple story. For our special purpose we should notice that, although many details of the gospels or Christmas traditions are left out for want of the necessary vocabulary, the spiritual atmosphere is kept. This has been one of the general features of our stories: We tried to keep the atmosphere without giving all details. Another characteristic of this legend-like story is the repetition of the same words which gives an almost primitive impression. This has been extensively used by students in their compositions. Finally we notice that a word too technical for our stage of French has been replaced by a periphrase of more usual words: *Stable* became "le bâtiment pour les chevaux."

Giving scope to the students' ingenuity brought real originality in their work. A student, trying to describe a friend of hers who is too fond of her bed in the morning, is stopped by the lack of the proper word for 'went to sleep again.' Unable to write directly she had recourse to a description: "Les autres jeunes filles passent devant sa porte en chantant. Hélène ne les entend pas maintenant." Now I doubt very much if the girl could have expressed so well the atmosphere of the early morning in the dormitory had she been able to hunt in a dictionary and write (let us suppose without any mistakes) "Hélène s'est rendormie." Necessity is the mother of invention. Another found an expression for the idea of death in these words: "Il a fermé les yeux pour toujours." The grief of his wife was depicted by saying, "Elle a les yeux rouges." If we want to describe the feelings of a little boy who has stolen his first smoke, we hear his mother telling him: "Votre figure est toute blanche!"

So by cutting out unessential details, by bringing more or less successful circumstantial evidence to express the dry, bare fact when the direct word is lacking, by using repetitions when we want intensity, we often have original composition and we may even arrive at rhythmical sequence. A few times students reached a near-verse form. Let us quote an instance.

Toutes les nations ont leurs plaisirs: l'Allemand boit de la bière, le Français boit du vin, et parce que l'Américain ne peut pas en boire, il fume la cigarette: il la fume dans la maison il la fume sur le chemin: il la fume pendant qu'il travaille, et la fume pendant qu'il joue: il la fume pendant qu'il mange et l'autre jour un garçon a voulu la fumer pendant qu'il a été dans son lit. Dans la nuit il a trouvé son lit en feu. Ce garçon ouvre toujours ma porte.

Avez-vous une allumette?
Avez-vous une cigarette?
Toujours ce garçon me dit
Ou bien avez-vous un sac
De presque bon tabac
Pour fumer le jour et la nuit?

It goes without saying that the more than 200 free composition written by the twelve students of this class in about 15 weeks of the first semester are of unequal value, but they have certainly kept up the interest of all to the present day. The students feel that French is truly a living language and they use it rather freely in

class. After being coaxed for two or three weeks to tell their stories in class themselves, a few of them at first, then rapidly all of them, started to memorize their own compositions for oral work. An hour a week was set for our story telling. We understand each other very readily[2] and occasionally we have replies to what has been stated by a fellow student. A kind of weekly polemic was carried on in this way on the interesting subject: Who has the best lot, husband or wife? We then had the idea that we might have debates in French. The first one took place on April 14 on this question: Est-il bon d'avoir la coéducation dans les collèges Américains? A judge was invited for the occasion and was no less interested than we were in the results accomplished. I realize that this detail is outside the limits of my subject, but it shows how far the special treatment of vocabulary by free composition may lead students whose interest is supported.

The experiment is so encouraging that it seems desirable to have it tried on a larger scale. My fellow instructors have been kind enough to adopt the method in their classes. The result was a new interest in the language studied. But to have the best results, we all realize that training the students from the beginning along the lines described in this paper would give them a better chance of success than if they are taken at the middle of a year.

Free the student from slavish use of his book; give all his faculties a chance to appear in his study. Without sacrificing thorough discipline, leave room for initiative; he will accept the opportunity with pleasure, and he may be able to do more than could otherwise be expected of him. . . . I do not know if he will think in French, but he will certainly think of French, because it will give his mind a chance to exert itself along its natural lines. It may even help him in his thinking and in his English composition. Many who would resent being shown in English once more the elementary rules of language and thought, find it acceptable in learning a new language. The greatest value of teaching modern language in the way described may be in giving scope to reflection and thus perhaps in building up stronger foundations for thought and expression.

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[2]In a few special tests I told new stories in French. Ten minutes were given to reproduce the story from memory. At least 10 out of 12 pupils wrote compositions in which all details could easily be recognized in spite of many mistakes in spelling.